Dinner Parties for Dummies

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Dinner Parties for Dummies

by Azure_K_Mello

Summary

Will is enjoying his vacation but he isn't sure how well he will do at hosting a dinner party. Thankfully his friends are nice and he can cook.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

It had been a nice vacation so far. Admittedly, it had really only been seventy-two hours but Jack hadn't called him once. Hannibal had stayed with him all weekend, keeping him company, playing with him and the dogs, cooking and drawing while Will worked on his boat. So far, it was one of the best vacations Will had ever had. And now he was watching the arrivals area, waiting for his dad to walk out and make it even better.

When he saw the man he felt himself smile and he cupped his hands around his mouth and called, "Daddy, over here!" He waved with both hands to catch the man's attention and he saw the moment his dad saw him as the other man's face lit up.

Then he heard one man say softly, "It can be so hard to tell if someone is gay or just Southern."

Another said, "Nah, bro, two handed waving sort of clears up the mystery."

Will felt himself go cold and he turned slightly to see the men talking. And then he felt himself smile. He went straight to them and said, "Excuse me," he didn't keep his voice down and didn't worry about creating a scene. The men looked surprised like two children caught in mischief and afraid of the reprimand. "There are a few things you should know. The first is that being gay and being Southern are not mutually exclusive. The second is that neither of you talk as quietly as you think you talk. And the third, and here's the part I find hilarious and you really aren't going to, is that neither of you are very good at faces. It is not illegal to be a bigot, it's not illegal to pass comments about the behavior of others. But it is really stupid to make bigoted comments about a professor at your academy when you can't whisper. I want your IDs, right now. Please know: I honestly don't care what you think of me. I do, however, have a large problem with two 'bros' who want to be FBI agents making any bigoted comments that they think are funny." They handed over their IDs and Will took pictures of them making sure all their info was clear and legible. "I'm gonna go have a good time with my dad, who flew up from New Orleans. I'm calling the Dean in the morning expect to be on her carpet by the afternoon. She will rip you a new one but be glad you're getting whatever punishment she gives you because if this happened when you were agents you'd be on unpaid leave pending an investigation." He handed them back their IDs and smirked as he purposefully drawled, "Y'all have a good afternoon now, y'here?"

Turning away he left them with their fear. He heard one of them say, "I think that was Will Graham." He almost laughed.

His smile came back in full force as his dad grinned at him. When they met his dad dropped his carry-on to hug him fully, "Boy, you are a sight for sore eyes." He kissed Will's cheek and pulled back, "Let me have a look at you. You've gained weight. It looks good on you."

"Hannibal cooks and ever since the encephalitis I've been a lot better with time and feeding myself."

Beaming his dad said, "That's great. You look great. You need a haircut. I'll do it while I'm here."

“Hannibal might judge me.”

His dad shook his head, “We’ll wait until he’s not there and then we’ll tell him you were stupid and paid someone a hundred bucks to do it.”

Will laughed, “Okay,” he picked up his dad’s carry-on and took his rolling bag by the handle. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I saw JT getting on the plane. He didn’t have checked bags but he was picking up a car and checking into his hotel room.”

Will nodded, “He has my address. He’ll come when he’s ready.”

They headed outside and his dad hissed, “It’s freezing.”

“It’s sixty-two degrees,” Will said, rolling his eyes.

“Move south.”

“Nope, I like it here. You should move up here. We’ve got boats up here. You’re favorite kid lives up here. Great food.”

“My favorite does live here,” his dad nodded.

“How are my brothers?” asked Will as they walked through the parking lot.

“George has got another two months on his house arrest. He isn’t callin’ and I ain’t getting involved ‘til he does. Richy never picks up his phone. I honestly am not sure where he’s living. And Alex, well, I can’t turn on the TV without seein’ his face but he hasn’t called home in a while. It would be nice to live in a place where I actually see one of my kids.”

As they got into the car Will told him about his plan to buy the land and build a house. His dad listened to him as he spoke and Will said, “You’re only joking about the cold, right? Would you consider retiring here? I know we talk about it idly sometimes but have you thought about it?” He turned the key in the ignition and didn’t look at his dad, didn’t want to see his refusal.

“Your winters are horrible, but your summers are more bearable. And I do like the beautiful woods you live in, and your area’s crime rate. It would be nice to see more of you and the dogs. I’m still a year off retiring but I could easily see myself retiring here. I only have one nice son. I don’t know how many grandkids I have, I’m sure I’ve got a few between Richy and George, but I’ve never known ‘em. There’s not much tying me there. It would be nice to retire to a place where every inch of space doesn’t remind me of your mother.”

He looked away from the rearview mirror he was adjusting and said, “Really? You’d consider it.”

“No, Will, I’ll do it.”

Will's good vacation was only getting better. "Y'know, I remember that commercial, with the woman saying, 'Help, I've fallen and I can't get up.' It was on TV all the time when I was little."

"It still is, it's for life alert necklaces," his dad said.

"Right, the emergency service that comes if you slip in the shower and can't get to a phone. It scares me that you live down there, with all three of them so close by, and they wouldn't know if something happened to you."

"Honey, I'm a far way's off from needing a life alert necklace."

"I'm not saying you need one I'm just saying, I don't want you to ever feel like you're alone if something happens. You worry about me and are ready to step in and it goes both ways."

"I just flew first class on a two and half hour flight. I already knew that, Will."

"There's a large difference between paying to take care of you and actually taking care of you."

His dad laughed and said, "Well, if I ever become one of those cantankerous, mean, crazy old people who throws things please: don't hesitate to get a nurse. Don't make yourself miserable when you can pay to have someone take care of me."

That made Will laugh in return, "Okay, deal." He pulled out of the spot and maneuvered out of the parking lot, paying an exorbitant fee for the pleasure.

"So what's going on at the house? Is the party already underway?"

"The chili is cooking, the salad, pasta salad and potato salad are made. Hannibal bought a little booze, beer and bourbon. When I left he was baking bread with rosemary and garlic. He's gonna go pick up Abigail once it's out of the oven. They might be at the house or it might be empty."

"And Abigail is moving in when she's done with the hospital?" he asked. Will nodded. "Are you sure you want that?" Will nodded again, "Because if you don't want it I can think of a face-saving lie for you."

"Thanks, Daddy, but I want her to move in. I'm excited about it."

"Okay, good. I brought you a gift," said his dad rummaging through his carry-on. "Brought you several gifts but this might be the most important." He pulled a CD out of his bag. "Here, boy." He held it out so Will could see.

"The new Chris Ardoin?" Will smiled. "It's not on sale on the internet yet."

"Well, no, how popular is he outside of Louisiana? There's not much point in paying to have it sold on the internet when you're only going to sell a few copies."

"Do you want to put it on for me, please?" asked Will, feeling almost bouncy.

“Sure, it’s pretty good. The Ardoins are a very talented family. I grew up listening to his grandfather.”

Will nodded, “And I grew up listening to his dad.” His dad unwrapped it and slid it into the CD player. The first strains of an accordion filled the car and Will felt muscles he didn’t know were tense begin to relax. “This sounds like home.”

“I didn’t think you thought of Nuorleans as home.”

“I don’t,” Will shook his head. “When I think of home, picture my childhood, I think of us in the car, driving to a port city, with the radio blasting zydeco. I always got to sit in the front.”

“Your brothers played punch kick.”

“It’s not a game.”

“Well, it’s certainly not a fun game,” His dad chuckled. “What was so wrong with the combination of your mother’s genetics and mine? Two losers, a sociopath and one really nice kid with a severe neurological disorder.”

“Alex is psychopathic, Daddy. George is a sociopath. And it is genetics, Daddy, it was nothing you did. You are great and you did your best at all time. We had nice childhoods.”

“You were always a happy child. You would have had a happy childhood no matter what. As long as there were strays and boats you were good to go.”

“Maybe,” agreed Will easily.

The songs were easy to pick up and they were singing along once they got to the chorus. It was pleasant. As they pulled up to the house his dad sighed, “It’s really nice to be here, Will.” As he opened the door he said, “So, Hannibal drives a Bentley, huh?” He looked at the car. “That’s a pretty car.”

“But you can’t fit seven dogs in it,” Will got out and grabbed his dad’s bag.

“I doubt trips to P.E.T.C.O. were on his mind.” His dad stretched as he said it.

“You don’t have to spell it when the boys aren’t here.”

“Dogs have good ears, Will,” his dad reminded him.

They headed up the front steps and as Will opened the door he called, “We’re here.” The dogs ran to them and fell upon his dad, Harry made grumpy noises until his father lavished attention on him. “And, hello, Winston. I’m your grandhuman. It’s nice to meet you.” He stroked them all until they calmed down.

“They’ve missed you,” Will said by way of explanation. He looked up and saw Hannibal and Abigail smiling at them. “Daddy, these are Hannibal and Abigail.”

His dad looked up from the dogs with a smile, “Sorry, that was rude of me. I should have sought out the human beings first. It’s just that these dogs are the closest thing I’ve got to grandchildren.” He moved to the humans and shook their hands. “It’s so great to meet you both. I feel like I know you already.”

“I agree, Richard. It’s a pleasure to meet you in the flesh,” Hannibal said.

“It really is,” said Abigail. “Will’s been so excited.”

“Me too,” said his dad.

“I’ll bring your bag upstairs,” said Will.

“I have presents and it will be significantly lighter once they’re out.” He went to the bag and unzipped a pocket. He pulled out a six pack of Le Pavillon, “That’s for Alana. I know she likes beer.” Then he pulled out a bottle of fig wine, “Hannibal, this is for you. It’s sweet, it’s nice as a dessert wine or as a spritzer. It’s made down by the docks.” He handed it over with a smile. Then he pulled out a bag and looked inside, “These are tons of treats and toys for my granddogs. I’ll keep them wrapped until the morning because they’re liable to get over excited and want to play with stuff outside.”

It was a big bag and Abigail said, “You must really like dogs.”

He looked up with a smile, “I’ve never been a pet person. But Will loves these dogs. They’ve taken on much more significance because of that.” He pulled out a couple of boxes, one huge and one just big. Will recognized the label on the box and was surprised: his dad had gone to the most expensive candy shop in the city. He held the huge one out to Will and said, “This is for the house at large.” He held out the other to Abigail and said, “And, Abigail, these are for you. It’s just nice pralines. American pralines were invented in Nuorleans and we’re prouder of ‘em than we should be.”

“Is the one for the house wholly pralines?” asked Will.

“Yes, honey,” his dad said sarcastically, “I got on a plane and came up here without bringing you any divinity. I just didn’t get any for Abigail as no one born above the Mason-Dixon line likes divinity.”

Will smiled, “It’s delicious.”

His dad pulled out two more CDs and handed them to Will, “Phil Salazar and BeauSoleil brought out new ones.”

“Awesome, thanks, Daddy.”

“The BeauSoleil is amazing. I haven’t taken mine out of the stereo since I got it.”

“Really?” asked Will. “That’s high praise. Hannibal, you were asking about Louisiana French, now you get to hear it.” He unwrapped the CD and popped it into his stereo. The first few notes made Will smile. “That’s pretty.” He grinned at his dad as the man re-zipped his bag. There was a knock at the door and Will said, “Daddy, I’ll bring your bag upstairs. That’s

either Alana or JT so, as you know them both, why don't you grab the door. And Hannibal, would you be the host in my stead and grab drinks?" They both agreed and Will grabbed the bags. He could have opened the door on his way to the stairs. It wouldn't have been difficult but he needed a moment.

His house had never had more than two people in it at once. These were his friends, his dad, his lover, but it was still overwhelming. Groups had always been a challenge. Relating to one person he could just about manage but the more people there were the more difficult his balancing act became. He wanted just a moment by himself. He heard Alana talking to his dad and he took a deep breath as he put his dad's bags down. He reminded himself of who the people were: his father, a girl he felt paternal toward, the man who made everything easier, the only person he considered a friend from New Orleans and a girl he liked so much he fooled himself into thinking he wanted her in his bed. He cared about them and they would forgive any awkwardness in him.

In bed that morning he'd done Mort's breathing exercise, thinking of a solution for ever problem he might face. He'd considered his father's plane being late, Abigail being allergic to dogs, this hadn't occurred to him. There was nothing to be done now but try to relax. He straightened the bedcovers and breathed out again. "It'll be okay," he promised himself.

He headed back down and saw that people had moved into the kitchen and Hannibal was pouring out glasses of drinks while Alana was putting her new beers into the refrigerator with one Hannibal had bought already in a glass in her hand. He walked into the room fully and said, "Hi, Alana."

"Hey, your dad said you were dealing with his luggage," she smiled at him brightly.

He considered the company and the importance of honesty and said, "And I was having a very slight panic attack at the idea of hosting a party. Even a small one made me quite anxious."

She nodded and said, "Well, if the food is awful, one of the dogs bites someone and there's a small fire we'll all just be glad we're in good company."

That made him relax slightly and he chuckled, "I happen to know the food is pretty good."

"Well, we'll check that off the list of possibilities," she said.

He went to the fridge and started pulling out olives, salsa, sausage and cheeses. He got out nice crackers and hand cooked, but not home cooked, chips and laid things out for people. "It's not up to Hannibal's standards but it is homemade salsa."

Hannibal chuckled and wrapped his arm around Will's waist, "The secret to throwing a good dinner party is in giving people exactly what they wanted. Your dad wanted to meet Abigail and me, check. Alana wanted to eat your cooking and be here for Abigail when Abigail met your father and JT, check. Abigail wanted a night out of the hospital, to see if she might want to live here and meet your dad and JT. All we need is for JT to come and to eat dinner and you will have delivered exactly what people asked for. The secret to throwing a great party is

to up the ante: you're father brought sweets, booze and new music and Abigail has made a friend in Buster."

"He's just so sweet," said Abigail stroking the little dog who was practically burrowing into her leg.

He kissed Will's cheek, "Relax, you have thrown a perfect dinner party."

Will saw Alana's eyes go wide and he chuckled, "When you called Alana and invited her did you forget to say we were seeing one another?"

"Ah," said Hannibal, "that's an important detail." He released Will and said, "A lot was going on, you see, Alana."

She grinned, "That is better news than Richard bringing me artisan beer. Two of my favorite people got together. Congratulations."

Will ducked his head, feeling his ears blush. He wasn't sure he wanted his dad to cut his hair as it hid that unfortunate trait. Hannibal tried the salsa and said, "Will, you have a hidden talent. That is delicious."

"Will?" asked Abigail.

"Yes?"

"Can I see my future possible room, please?"

"Of course," he said, "follow me." They left the kitchen and he said, "Right now it's my room but I'm going to move upstairs."

"I don't want to kick you out of your room," she said. He told her all the reasons she should have the room, everything Hannibal had pointed out and she nodded. He opened the door and she looked around and out the window, "It's so pretty here. When Hannibal was driving me here I couldn't believe how pretty it was."

He smiled, "I've always thought so. We can paint the room whatever color you like, and I'll get a TV and cable and the internet. This can be your home." She sat down on the bed and patted next to her. So he shut the door and went to her side.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Will?" She spoke softly as she said, "You had a panic attack because four people you like are in your house. Are you sure you want someone living here?"

"I had a panic attack and I got over it because I want these four people here. I'm putting in an office upstairs. I promise, I won't ever get so overwhelmed as to not be happy that you're here. If you end up with eight friends down here I will hide in my office but I really wouldn't mind. But if you don't want to be here I won't be upset."

She considered it and said, "Just promise me something?"

“Anything that’s in my power to promise,” he agreed, sincerely meaning it.

“Promise you won’t go crazy and murder and eat girls who look like me?” she sort of laughed at the end but it wasn’t a happy noise.

“I once had a total mental breakdown. I killed myself and it took a lot of doctors to fix the damage I had done and get me breathing again. The hospital I went to wasn’t anywhere near as nice as yours. I didn’t speak for the first two weeks. I was a mess, total rock bottom, the peak of as crazy as I could ever be. And do you know what I never did?” she shook her head. “I was never violent to a single person other than myself. It’s not in my nature. And I could never hurt you, Abigail, or anyone else who wasn’t endangering someone.”

“Why did you hit rock bottom?” she asked. Will didn’t feel like she was pushing, like it was a test. She was curious about his life just as he was of hers.

“I hesitated and didn’t shoot someone I should have. He stabbed me and he killed more women.”

“I’m glad you didn’t hesitate with my dad.”

“Me too,” said Will. “I know we’re not the family you had, aren’t the family you want, but Hannibal and I are always going to be here for you.”

She smiled and said, “Marissa had a brother. He was older and cool. Once Marissa and I were really drunk at a party and there were some pushy guys, seniors, who were harassing us and he got between us and them, shouted at them and drove us to my house. My parents were out and he sobered us up. I wished I had an older brother. I don’t think of you as a dad stand-in but I do think of you as the cool big brother I wanted.” He smiled back at her and she looked around, “What do you think about mauve with pale woodwork?”

“It’s your room. I’ll paint it hot pink and lime green if you want.” There was a knock at the door and he said, “That will be JT.”

He started to stand and she caught his hand, “Do you like him? Trust him?”

“When I was in the hospital he was the only person my dad let in to see me.” He sat down again. “He spoke in a soft voice and he never published a word about me in his column on crime and the police force. The city was so focused on that case: an exclusive on how the cop who failed to close it committed suicide, was revived and in a mental hospital would have sold like hotcakes. He’s the only friend I have from New Orleans and I wouldn’t have ever suggested you meet him if I didn’t like and trust him.”

She nodded and stood, “Okay. Don’t bother with a TV or cable. I watch all my shows online. But it’s totally weird that you don’t have the internet.”

“Check,” he said, referring to Hannibal’s words earlier. He got up from the bed and as he opened the door he saw his dad letting JT in and he said, “Hey, JT we were just checking out Abigail’s new room.”

“We’re painting it mauve with pale woodwork,” Abigail added.

“That could be the first line of your book,” said JT. He held out his hand, “JT Lydeck.”

“Abigail Hobbs. It’s nice to meet Will’s friend. I’ve heard good things.”

He nodded but said, “You’ll probably be glad to hear that I’ve heard very little about you except for in horribly written, ill-informed blog posts.”

“TattleCrime?”

He nodded again and said, “So, I’m going to ignore absolutely all of that and say that anyone the very-disconnected Will Graham chooses to have in his life is someone I’m pleased to meet.” He released her hand.

“There are more people Will likes in the kitchen,” said his dad.

“There are more people Will likes?” JT joked.

“Hey, I have one person I like who’s not even here,” Will protested, thinking of Beverly Katz. They weren’t friends but he liked her.

JT just smiled at him, “That’s good. Something smells amazing.” The dogs came to investigate the noise of a new person and JT said, “Harry, you got some siblings!”

“Yes, he did. Six brothers. And the smell is chili,” said Will, “let me take your coat.” Will hung it by the door and said, “Come through to the kitchen.”

In the kitchen he ran through introductions and JT said, “It’s great to meet you, Hannibal and Alana. Will’s crazy-weird mind has the most amazing knack for finding the nice people in a room and making them part of his pack. I’m not sure how it works, because only Will and God get how his mind works, but it does so it’s really nice to meet you.”

Will chuckled at the comment on his mind. Just like Beverly Katz, JT could say inappropriate things that made him smile, things that would be horribly rude from other. Will always tried to forgive rudeness because he knew that most people were constantly forgiving him his. But with JT and Beverly it never grated on him, it never called for forgiveness as it never incited any hurt. He smiled at JT as he asked, “Would you like a stiff drink or a soft one?”

“You have alcohol?” JT acted like he was scandalized. “Moving north changed you.”

“I sent Hannibal on a booze run. He bought beer and bourbon because I know you drink spiked Arnold Palmers.”

“That’s very kind of you. I’ll take a lightly spiked Arnold Palmer.” Will went to the fridge to get the ice and the ice tea lemonade. The song changed and JT said, “This is my jam. Every song on this album is amazing but this is my jam.”

Will smiled, “Daddy brought me up all the new releases.”

“You said it’s in French,” said Abigail, “but I took French and this doesn’t sound like French.”

“It’s Louisiana Creole,” said JT. “It’s based on French.”

“So you guys understand it?” she asked.

“He met a girl at a party; they hit it off; she gave him her number; he lost his phone. Now it’s the next morning and he’s listing off the stuff he still has: cigarettes, lighter, beer bottle cap, house keys, Amex, just not his phone or his dignity,” Will said.

“I like how there’s a whole verse about how he woke up with one flip flop on and the other one broken,” said his dad. “It’s just so easy to picture.”

Will smiled, he liked the song and, glancing around, he liked all the people surrounding him. “Before we get too off topic and start in on the roots of language does anyone want chili without avocado and cheddar? I was going to put it in a casserole and put it under the broiler but I know some people don’t like cooked avocado.”

“As the chef prefers,” Hannibal reminded him.

And Abigail said, “My dad used to barbeque avocadoes. I loved them.”

“Great, Alana?” he asked, turning to her.

“I’ve never had cooked avocado but I love everything you cook so I trust you.”

“Great,” Will said and turned to get the chili off the heat. “JT how long are you here for? I don’t want to waste too much time on music when you are here on supposedly on business.”

“Good point,” agreed JT. “I’m flying out tomorrow night. Abigail, we’re meant to be talking about writing books. Will said you’d been working with Freddie Lounds but I have a really hard time believing that she was good at that. So what questions do you have?”

She breathed out as she said, “I don’t even know where to start.”

Will was able to busy himself with the casserole dish. It smelled amazing as he ladled it out and started cutting up the avocado. “Why don’t I start, then?” said JT. “What do you want to get out of writing the book? There are lots of reasons to write a book about surviving. Some people use it as therapy, some as a way to set the record straight. What are you looking for?”

“Two things really. The first is crass but practical: I need money. There will be wrongful death suits and that’s fine. Those people lost their daughters. He took them. My parents saved their whole lives for my college money. And that’s all going to go. I don’t know if I’m going to college but I need money, no matter what happens next, I can’t be broke.”

“That’s not crass, Abigail, that’s very reasonable. It’s important to provide for your future,” said JT. “And your other reason?”

“Once I was in a restaurant and this woman came in and she handed me a pen it said, ‘I am deaf. Please by this pen by taking it and placing a dollar on the table. If you don’t want it. Leave it on the table and I’ll be back to pick it up.’ Then she walked away. I didn’t know if she was really deaf; I didn’t know why — just because she was deaf — she couldn’t get a job. I had no information but what was written on the pen. It was my decision to give her the dollar or not. That’s what I want. I want the book to be my pen. People at the hospital ask me things, ‘Did you keep the clothes you were wearing when your dad cut your throat?’ ‘Did you know any of the victims?’ ‘Didn’t you think that taking a girl hunting was weird?’ And all I can think is, ‘Piss off. Leave me alone.’ So I want to have the book so I can say, ‘Any question I would answer is in there. And any question that isn’t answered by the book isn’t going to be answered. Not by me, at least. Make up your own mind and leave me out of it.’ Let them make their own decision of what to think of me and I can walk away.”

“Okay,” agreed JT. “That’s achievable. Now, a piece of advice. Even if you aren’t treating it as therapy I suggest you keep your therapist close by incase anything comes up that you would like more help with than a ghost can provide. But that only works if you like and trust your therapist.”

Will didn’t turn around but he could hear from her voice that she was smiling when she said, “Dr. Bloom is my psychiatrist. Clearly, I like her. We wouldn’t be at the same dinner party if I didn’t.”

“Good,” he said.

Will was finished with the spoon, turned on the broiler and turned back to the group. Abigail was standing next to him and he said, “Here, lick this.” She smiled but quirked an eyebrow as she took it from him, “What?” he asked.

“Is this the chili equivalent of licking the bowl when you make a cake?” she asked.

“Exactly the same,” he nodded.

She popped it into her mouth and her eyes went wide. As she released the spoon from her lips she said, “That is really delicious.”

“Good.” He moved to the fridge to get the cheese.

“So,” said Abigail, “Freddie Lounds said that when you’re writing a book you shouldn’t talk to anyone.”

“No, she’s totally wrong. Ghosts need to keep the author’s confidence; authors don’t need to keep theirs.”

“She got angry when I told Will that she wanted me to write about him. I didn’t want to write about Will. I mean, I would write about Will but she wanted to drag his name through the mud.”

“Well, that’s another thing she was doing wrong. It’s your book: you don’t write about anything you don’t want to write about.”

“She didn’t want to ghost it; it was supposed to be written by both of us. She wanted to have every other chapter to be from her posts on TattleCrime about the murders at the time.”

JT was quiet for a moment and then said, “Abigail, how much did you like Freddie?”

“She was mean about Will. She made mean girl comments about Will. She said the sort of things that girls in high school say and you think they stop saying after high school. And she was really pushy and she didn’t seem trustworthy. But I appreciated that she was trying to help me.”

He nodded and thought about his words, clearly weighing them before he said, “She wasn’t though. She was screwing you, Abigail. Usually I avoid harsh language around women because I’m a southern gentleman and we don’t swear around women but that’s what she was doing. She was going to get all the information you had and then publish the book as her own with you as a contributor. She had every intention of paying you as little as possible. That’s why she didn’t want you talking about it; she was going to downplay your role. And she would have put crime scene photos on the cover. You need a ghost, not a co-author. It’s your story, not theirs. She was screwing you.”

“Seriously?” she asked.

“I’m really sorry, but she wasn’t being a friend. Anyone who wants you to keep secrets and wants you to write about things you don’t like is someone you should run from.” Will put the casserole into the oven and gently squeezed her arm as he passed her to put the cheese back into the fridge.

There was nothing left for Will to busy himself with so he started snacking. He liked the blue cheese on the chips instead of on the crackers. He watched his hands which made it easier to be in a room filled with people. It was easier to acclimatize to the company when he could focus on something else.

JT continued speaking saying, “You need a ghost. And you need a ghost you like and trust; it’s someone who you’ll be talking to an awful lot.” He sighed and popped a chip covered into salsa into his mouth, clearly giving her a moment to process. After he swallowed he said, “The next question is of content. What do you want to write about? There are lots of different types of ghosts and it’s important to find one who fits with the style of the book.”

“Well, Freddie said that writing about the other girls would make it sell better.”

“Ignore everything Freddie said: she’s a liar. She wanted to put them on the cover. She wanted to write the gore. You haven’t spoken about the case, the FBI has barely said a word about it. It gripped the country for nine months and no one got any answers. Any information you share will be bought. You put your name on a Post-it and publishers will clamor to pay you for it and people will line up to buy it. Ninety percent of first round buyers will be ghouls. They’ll be the people who want to know if you kept your clothes. The other ten percent will be journalists, reviewing it. Don’t read the reviews. Most people are kind to survivors but some are jerks. This is your pen. Once you’ve handed it to them just walk away. The second round of buyers will be buying it because of its content. Don’t worry; you’ll make your money. So make the book what you want because it will sell either way.”

“My dad was amazing, JT, really. You would have liked him. I adored him right up until the end. He came to every softball game, soccer game and tennis match. I told him when I pranged the car so that he would break it to Mom. I asked him for advice about boys. He helped me with my homework. I want to talk about my dad, I want to tell people about my life. And, sure, what happened in the kitchen is part of my life. But I don’t want it to be what defines me or the book. I think it should be in there but I didn’t know those girls and I didn’t know that side of him.”

“Sounds like a great book,” said JT, “Any good ghost can help you.”

“How much money does a ghost make?” asked Abigail, “What’s the royalty split?”

“No royalties. A good ghost gets a fee. I always charge two thousand a month. Professional ghostwriters get more. It depends on why they’re doing it. It’s not how I earn my living. I do this as my own form of a social service. I wouldn’t take any money if I didn’t have to take time off my real job to do it. When I was first working on crime journalism I read several books by survivors and I was saddened. They weren’t well written. I think someone should help survivors be presented in their best light. Someone should have helped them find their clearest voice. No ghost writer should get royalties. It’s a service. No plumber would say, ‘I’ve installed your new sink now I can come back and use it whenever I like.’ This isn’t the ghost’s book. It’s yours. Depending on the ghost there are all different ways to work. Would you like to hear my method?”

“Yes, please,” said Abigail as she popped an olive into her mouth.

“Okay, well, first I would send you a contract. It would say that I make two thousand dollars a month, payable when the book deal goes through. It would also say that you have my complete confidence and that I am your lawyer. You or Hannibal or Will would get a lawyer to look that over and say, ‘This guy is on the level.’ You would sign it and send it back. It seem a little weird to bring a contract naming me as your lawyer to a lawyer but it’s for your protection. That way you can say anything you want to me, any secret and know that not only won’t I tell anyone but I can’t. You can say, ‘Then I robbed a bank.’ And if the cops come to me and ask if you robbed a bank I would say, ‘I’m her lawyer.’ You can say, ‘I hate Dr. Bloom,’ and I can’t tell Alana. I have a law degree, I don’t use it — much to my mother’s chagrin — but it’s really useful in this situation.

“Next, as you live so far away I would suggest we Skype each other, an hour a day four days a week at a time that works for both of us. I would record those conversations, transcribe them and delete the videos. Then I would write them up into a narrative. I would email you the transcript and the narrative. You would read it and make sure it sounded like you. You would email me and say, ‘Cut this sentence; I don’t like that you included this; I actually meant to say the word “like” that many time in that sentence.’ I would make those changes. Usually that whole process takes two months. That’s when you want to keep your people close. Things will come up that you didn’t realize you wanted to talk about and you might find yourself wanting to share with Will, Hannibal or Alana. Don’t fight that urge. I have to keep your confidence but you are free to start a blog if you want.

“After those two months we figure out structure. Is your book a straightforward narration, is it stream of consciousness, should it have chapters, sections, subheads? We talk about it, you decide what feels most natural to you. That usually take two weeks, more email than Skype

but we can Skype if you like. Then I would organize it however you want it. That is really fast, a week usually. I would send you that. You read it, you have whoever else you want to see it read it. And we either make changes or you rubberstamp it. Take your time considering whether or not to okay it. You want it to be perfect. So if you don't like it we can reedit it.
"Then, this is very different from other ghosts, I would find you your publisher. I've made a lot of connections and I will get you the best deal. You get money up front, at least seven figures, you get royalties and we would negotiate any media, interviews, I'd make sure you picked the interviewers, the time, the locations. I want to make sure that you are comfortable because that can be very overwhelming.
"Then would be the cover. Do you want a picture with your family or a nice picture of you? We'll answer that question closer to the time but if you do a photo-shoot I'll fly up. We want to make sure that they don't try and exploit you. A lot of photographers try to make survivors look like victims on the cover of the book. They add dark circles or try to use the photo they took of you when you were off guard and not smiling. I'll make sure they don't do anything stupid. The only person who decides if you are a victim is you. No one else gets to make that choice for you.
"Then you'll get advanced copies to send out to people. Some we'll send to The Times and other places to get early reviews for the back cover. We don't put anything on there that doesn't scream your praise. The others you can send to anyone you feel should have a heads-up. Maybe the parents of the girls or any family members or friends. They don't have to okay it or anything, it's just a nice courtesy. That's everything, the whole process."

"Okay, let's do it," said Abigail.

"You want me to make you a list of ghosts I know? Men, women, ages, background? What are you looking for?"

"No, let's do this: you and me."

He nodded slowly, "Okay, here's what we'll do: we'll eat dinner, enjoy this party. I'll leave promptly after dinner and you can talk about it. I'm sure Will, Alana and Hannibal will have advice. Sleep on it and call Will in the morning. He's on vacation so you won't be interrupting anything. He'll call me and say whether or not we're doing it. If you realize that it was a bad idea I'll send you that list of ghosts with no hard feelings. If you want to do it I'll come to your hospital so we can figure out a schedule and Alana can talk to the hospital about setting you up with Skype. It can be very therapeutic and I've never had a hospital object. Okay?"

"Okay," she agreed.

"That's all the business, right?" asked Will and when JT nodded he said, "great. Hannibal would you please slice the bread for me? We're almost ready. Abigail, can you grab utensils, please? They're in that drawer. And Alana can you get the plates, please?" he went to the fridge and started to pull out salads.

"Is an army coming to eat all the food?" asked Alana.

"I like leftovers and I plan on sending you home with whatever you want," he said.

Everyone relaxed into the evening. Hannibal had helped Will put the extra leaf into the table so everyone could sit comfortably. It was totally unlike Hannibal's dinner parties. Will had never gone to one but he knew people wore tuxes, and Hannibal hired waiters. Here people were helping themselves and using paper napkins. Abigail slipped her shoes off under the table so she could scratch Buster with her toes. He told her, completely seriously, that the only house rule was that they never fed the dogs from the table. "They don't beg for food because they've been trained to think that food on the table is in no way shape or form theirs."

"That's a good rule," Abigail said, "Marissa had a dog that begged for food all the time. None of these guys have done it even once."

"Is Marissa?" asked JT. "Is she a friend of yours?"

Will saw Abigail swallow hard, "Marissa Schurr."

Recognition appeared on his face, "The girl in the antler room. She was a friend?"

"My best friend since we were three," she nodded. "She'll be in the book. Her mom won't be happy about that but I won't put in anything bad. I won't tell the story of last Thanksgiving break when we got drunk on Jell-O shots and played ding-dong-ditch. I was so drunk and running barefoot and I tripped and broke my toe. She ended up puking in a bush. I remember trying to put on my shoes and my toe was so swollen I limped barefoot all the way back to her house while she had to stop every three hundred yard to vomit. And we couldn't stop laughing. And then we had to climb up the drainpipe to sneak back into her room. It was hilarious but I wouldn't put that in. That's the sort of story that, while funny, she wouldn't have wanted her mom to know."

JT smiled at her, "You can put in any stories you like. Any that seem legally questionable we'll have a lawyer who actually practices law glance it over and okay it."

"Kids do crazy stuff, if Marissa's mom really thinks she was a perfect little angel she's a fool," said Will's dad.

Abigail smiled, "Really, Mr. Graham? Did Will do crazy stuff?"

"Abigail, you have to call Alana 'Dr. Bloom' because you have a professional relationship with her but you can call me Richard. And, yeah, Will did some crazy stuff. His brothers were crazier. They drank too much and broke limbs while having adventures while drunk, they got arrested, blew up a mail box. And if they'd stopped doing it when they were teens it could have all been chalked up to stupid kid stuff. Alex grew out of it. But Richy and George never did."

"What did Will do?" asked Abigail, still smiling.

"He stole dogs when he was little, four-years-old, I'd send him out to play and then see him in our yard playing with a well groomed dog. He did it three times. He had to be taught that you can't steal people's pets and that you can play with strays but you can't keep them. He

forgot the second part of that rule when he moved out. As a teenager he had sex with horribly inappropriate people. But he grew out of it during college."

Everyone laughed at that. "Dogs are my version of guns: you can have my strays when you pry them from my cold dead hands."

"Are they all strays?" asked Abigail.

"I like the word stray because it's nicer than abandoned. People drop dogs out here. Ones that they don't want. Ones that got too big, ones that bark too much, timid ones, ones that bite, unplanned puppies. All the stupid reasons people too stupid to properly train a dog might cite. Those people shouldn't be allowed dogs in the first place. Puppies I can give to the pound for adoption: everyone wants a puppy but the big ones I keep. People are less likely to adopt grown dogs. Me, I'll adopt anything with four legs and a bark. I loved dogs when I was little but we couldn't afford one. Now I can afford seven and Daddy can't say no so I own seven."

Everyone laughed at that too and, as Will was pushed back from the table and not eating Harry jumped into his lap. That made people laugh more.

People praised Will on the chili and he said, "I use chuck instead of ground beef and I use black coffee and semisweet chocolate as my secret ingredients." He made sure their glasses were never low and switched CDs when the first one ended.

Alana got one of her New Orleans beers from the fridge and took a glass from the cupboard at her first sip she said, "Wow, Richard, that's delicious."

"Oh, good, I know you like ales and that's a local specialty."

"I saw the wine Richard brought you," said JT to Hannibal, "I'm sure he told you it's great as dessert wine and it is but my girlfriend uses it in chocolate molten cake and it's phenomenal. It's like one of those liqueur chocolates. I could email Will the recipe if you're interested."

Hannibal nodded, "That would be most kind of you. I cook an awful lot and am always looking for new recipes."

"What Hannibal means," said Alana, taking a sip of her beer, "is that he throws dinner parties for forty people with nine courses. They're the talk of the town and high society waits with baited breath to see if they've made the cut. I was at an art opening where it was all anyone was talking about. I was asked if I had been invited and, when I said that I would not be at the dinner but admitted that Hannibal is a close friend and I would be spending the evening before with a tasting menu in his kitchen, people looked so envious that I had to fight not to laugh."

Hannibal chuckled and said, "While I'm usually quite a modest man I have to admit that Alana is very being completely truthful. Ruder people demand to know when the next party will be and if they're garnering an invitation. When they're really pushy I make a mental note that they aren't getting an invite for as long as they're breathing."

JT laughed, “Well I’m not sure the cake is classy enough for that but it really hits the spot on a cool evening.”

“I would be most appreciative of you sending it.”

They were sitting about, chatting after dinner. Hannibal was stroking the back of his head, gently playing with Will’s curls. Will liked it; it didn’t make him want to move away; it didn’t make him fidgety. After a little while Will said, “I’m going to make coffee while we digest. Everyone want coffee?”

“That’s my cue to leave,” said JT. “I hate to dine and ditch but you should really discuss ghosts and you should do so without a ghost present.” He stood and said, “It was wonderful to meet you all and a pleasure, as always, Richard.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” said Abigail with a smile.

“Well, I’d like that but if you have second thoughts I won’t be offended and I’ll make you a list of possible ghosts.”

“Thank you,” said Abigail.

“Hannibal, would you please make the coffee? Abigail, you can see Calvin’s skill. It’s very impressive. I’ll show you out, JT.” He followed JT back into the living room, with Winston hot on his heels. Will fetched his coat and said, “It was great to see you. I’ll call you in the morning but if Abigail doesn’t want to write the book why don’t you come over for lunch? We’ll have sloppy chili sandwiches and salads.”

“I’d love to have a look at that boat in daylight,” said JT, nodding to the boat in the driveway.

“Great. Thank you for coming, JT. We haven’t spoken in years and you just got on a plane.”

“Well,” JT shrugged as he put on his coat, “I’ve always liked you and the minute you said Abigail had been working with Freddie Lounds I knew it was my civic duty to come up here and point out all the problems with that. It really is great to see you and it’s nice to meet your friends. I worry about you: the most honest cop I know becomes a Fed? That’s worrying.”

“I’m not a real Fed, just a teacher with a temporary badge.”

“We both know you’re a hell of a lot more than that, Will.” He opened the door and said, “We’ll talk in the morning.”

He stood by the door, waiting until JT pulled away. Winston pushed against him seeking his attention now that there was no human to distract Will. He stroked him, absent mindedly, thinking about old times. After the hospital, when Will had been working in the docks, JT had visited him at lunch, bringing sandwiches or suggesting dives that served lunch. He’d always been a good friend, though Will had done little to deserve it. “Good boy, Winston, good boy.”

He went back into the kitchen and was promptly handed a cup of coffee. He saw that Alana was bringing the sugar to the table while he dad was getting the milk. He grabbed the tin of

Gavottes and the box of sweets his dad had brought and carried them to the table. “JT isn’t missing out of dessert. I’ve never been good at cooking sweet things and he can go to Southern Candymakers any time he wants.” He took the lid off the tin and the top off the box of chocolates. It wasn’t the fanciest dessert but it was much better than anything he could have cooked.

“I liked him,” said Abigail. “I liked him a lot. And I like that we’d do it over Skype because, I don’t know, because it would give us a little distance and I don’t really like the idea of being that intimate with anyone. I think having him in another city would actually be beneficial.” She smiled and looked around the room, “So what are the flaws, what am I missing?”

“Y’know, I’m protective of Will,” said Alana. “I wouldn’t even let myself be alone with him for the first two and a half years I knew him. We were friends but I was afraid that, as I find him so interesting psychologically, I would accidentally start studying him instead of hanging out with him. It took me two and a half years to fully trust myself to look beyond his mind and see nothing but my friend. I don’t like it when people like Jack Crawford, or even Hannibal when they first met, take an interest in him because I worry about them exploiting Will for his mind instead of exploiting him for his dogs. When people talk about his brain I tense up, afraid that they’re more interested in whatever is going on in there instead of what’s coming out of his mouth. But JT was making jokes about him and the way he thinks and they weren’t mean jokes. Nothing that came out of his mouth made me bristle; I never felt any alarms. I liked him.”

“He remembered Harry’s name,” said Will, looking at the dog. “He’s always been good at seeing what someone else thinks is important and taking that into account and making important to him. So, even though I haven’t seen him since I moved up here and he’s a cat person, he remembered Harry’s name.” Will shrugged, “I can’t give you impartial advice. I like JT, a lot, and I trust him. I wouldn’t have had him come up here — even just to talk to you about the book — if I didn’t like him.” He glanced at Alana, “You tried to protect me from Hannibal?” He took a piece of divinity from the box.

She nodded, “He thought you were fascinating when you first met. And then he stopped thinking how you’re brain functions was the most interesting part about you and was interested in your company and cooking and I relaxed. I’m still not happy about Jack Crawford.”

“I don’t like Jack,” Will admitted, “not as a boss or a person. He will never be eating at this table. I can work with him but the way he looks at me makes my skin crawl, the open curiosity. It’s like you say, he’s not interested in my dogs, or boat, or even my monographs. He’s purely interested in my mind; wants to ‘borrow’ my imagination. He wouldn’t have been interested in the snacks or the company. He would have been paying attention to the fact that I purposefully kept my back turned to my company for the first five minutes we were all together.”

“I didn’t notice that,” said Abigail.

“I did,” said Alana and Hannibal in unison. Hannibal added, “It was Will’s way of relaxing into the situation. And it worked; you were the perfect host, Will.”

Will smiled and Alana raised her coffee cup. “A toast, to Will for throwing an amazing first dinner party: great music, great company, great food.”

“To Will,” everyone repeated, raising their coffee cups.

“Are you allowed to call it a dinner party when you serve chili?”

“A sit down meal, music, more than two guests,” listing the three things off on his fingers. “That’s a dinner party. Add in the fact that some people were meeting for the first time and you introduced them because you felt they would like each other and find each other interesting it becomes a good dinner party. Finally, add in that that chili was delicious — and that’s praise coming from a man who has eaten on four different continents — and it’s a great dinner party. It was an exceptional accomplishment.”

“You throw parties with forty guests,” Will reminded him.

Hannibal nodded and said, “A quite a few of those have gone spectacularly poorly because I messed up on the guest list. One time I not only messed up on the guest list, I messed up on the seating chart. Punches were thrown. I was unaware of someone’s infidelity when I sat a man near his wife’s lover. Sadly, unlike me, the man was aware of the affair.” Will laughed and Hannibal said, “It wasn’t funny at the time.” Everyone, including Hannibal joined Will in laughing. “I almost called the cops to my own dining room.” He reached into the box of sweets and said, “Is this the divinity?” Will nodded and Hannibal took a bite. He chewed and raised an eyebrow as he swallowed, “Really, Will?”

Will took the other half of the candy from him and said, “I love it,” before popping it into his mouth.

“Do you know what I liked about JT?” asked Hannibal.

“What?” asked Abigail as she bit into a tortue. She’d pulled her feet up onto the chair. Clearly she was comfortable. And seeing how comfortable she was made Will happy.

“He flew here simply to talk to you about ghostwriting. He didn’t come here to sell you anything. His contract is to protect you, not him. And he answered all your question. You said you didn’t want to be crass and talk about money and he came back by telling you you’ll make seven figures and royalties. He asked you what you wanted your book to be about and you actually talked about it. When you asked to work with him he told you to sleep on it. All of those speak to his integrity. So, sleep on it, see how you feel about this when you’re by yourself in the morning and then make your decision.”

“I liked him,” she repeated. Buster scratched at her chair, disappointed in losing her attention. She lifted him onto her lap, “He is so sweet.”

“Hannibal won’t let me have them in bed, so, I’m sure any of them that you let into your bed would be thrilled.”

“I’ve never said the dogs cannot sleep in the bed,” said Hannibal with a smile.

“Hannibal, can the dogs sleep in the bed?”

Hannibal nodded, “Absolutely, but then I won’t sleep in it.”

People laughed at that and Buster licked at Abigail’s chin. “Your loss, Hannibal. I’m going to have a bed covered in dogs when I move in.”

“And a bed covered in dog hair and dog drool,” Hannibal said.

“My bed is a twin,” said Abigail.

“We can get you a bigger bed,” said Will. “We can get you all new furniture, or just a new bed or you ca keep your and make the big dogs jealous that they don’t get to sleep in your bed.”

Abigail thought about it and said, “I like my furniture. We redid my bedroom when I graduated from junior high: sage walls and all new stuff that I picked out at IKEA. People make fun of IKEA but really it’s all kind of kitschy modernist and I liked what I picked, I still like what I picked. We all painted my room together and I remember when it was dry we got out all the boxes. Mom had to go to work but Dad and I spent the whole day putting my furniture together. It’s nowhere near as easy as you think it will be. We kept jamming our fingers with the crappy little tools they gave us. We tried to use our own tools but none of them fit so we had to use theirs. It was really frustrating and my dad said, ‘Honey, go on the internet and Google Swedish swear words. If we’re gonna do this let’s do it right.’” She laughed remembering it, “We shouted, ‘Inte ens din mamma gillar dig,’ a lot.”

“What does that mean?” asked Will.

“Even your mom doesn’t like you,” said Abigail with a smile. “We’ve put all the furniture in storage. The guestroom bed was a queen and it fits in with my room’s stuff so I’ll take that one. I should go through it all at some point, get rid of most of it. I don’t need it. But there are some family treasures that I’d be sad to lose.”

Alana said softly, “Right now just focus on learning to sleep through the night and writing your book. You’ll get through everything you have to do in the end.”

Abigail nodded and said, “I think the hospital is good for me. I don’t like the girls but I like the quiet, the security and the food.” Quietly she added, “I’m not really ready to leave for more than a day. The idea of having to walk down a street or into a store by myself freaks me out.” She shook her head, clearly attempting to physically escape the thought. “Will, what are you going to do with the furniture that’s upstairs now?”

Shrugging Will said, “I don’t know. Daddy’s moving up here. We’re going to build a house on the plot next door.” He turned to his dad. “Do you want some guestroom furniture?”

“I like the mattress upstairs more than my one at home so I’ll probably swap them over,” said his dad. “Yes, I’ll take the furniture, please. You know I’ve never been one for a lot of possessions. All the places we rented when you were little came with furniture. I’ll furnish this place when I get up here but it’ll be good to have some already here.”

“Great,” said Will.

“You’re building a house?” asked Abigail.

“First we gotta buy the land and get a design but, yeah,” said his dad. “I’m gonna be your neighbor. I’m retiring in a year’s time. It’ll be nice to be close to Will.”

She smiled, “It’s nice to know we’ll have a good neighbor if we need to borrow a cup of sugar.”

“My sugar is yours for the taking,” he promised.

She ate a praline and said, “Whatever this is, it’s the best thing in the box.”

“That’s what Daddy brought you a box of,” Will said, “The American praline.”

“Wow, thank you, Richard. I know what I’ll be snacking on while reading in bed.”

“Speaking of bed, it’s getting late and it’s a weeknight,” said Alana, “and Richard was on a plane. Can I give you a ride back to the hospital?”

Abigail nodded, but Hannibal said, “It’s on my way home, Alana.”

“You’re not staying?” asked Abigail.

“Tomorrow is my early day. I have my first patient at six AM. Besides, just as JT left so we could talk about him, Richard needs to give Will his first impressions of me.”

His dad smiled and said, “All good, I assure you. But I might embarrass you with praise if you’re here.”

Hannibal chuckled, “Well then, let’s avoid that.”

Soon enough they were all by the door with Tupperware, beer, candy and wine and Will said, “If you want JT to come see you I’ll bring lunch; this chili is better the second day anyway. If not, I promised him lunch but I’ll bring you cold chili for an afternoon snack?” he said to Abigail.

“I’ll see you at lunch,” she assured him.

As Hannibal passed him he gave Will a lingering kiss, “I’m done at three tomorrow. I’ll call you before I head over.”

“Okay,” Will agreed. And after goodnights were said, and car motors started, Will was alone with his dad. He turned to him and said, “So? Verdict.”

“Perfect,” his dad shook his head slowly. “Disturbingly perfect. He’s nice, calm, very clever and weird. He was wearing a three piece suit while eating chili, that’s odd. But you’ve never been able to make it work with normal guys so I think a little oddness is needed: you accept

his quirks, he accepts yours, no one asks for any changes. He clearly likes you and when he touched you you didn't do that thing you always do with boyfriends."

"I do a thing?" asked Will. He started back to the kitchen and his dad followed him.

"You flinch and then remember you're sposda be okay with it so you force yourself to relax. You never flinched once, tonight."

"I like it when he touches me." Will poured out the last two cups of coffee out of the press. He added milk to his father's cup before handing it off and sitting back down at the table.

"I could tell. And he likes you. My goodness does he. The way he looks at you? He's bitten by the bug."

Will chuckled at the expression, "I'm glad he passed. I like him."

"He didn't pass, honey, he aced it. When you turned your back on the room he neither reacted nor tried to get you to join in. He never tried to force eye contact on you. Alana still tries, when you talk, to make eye contact. He didn't. He isn't a dog person yet Calvin was sitting on his feet most of the night. And, y'know, you have a type: older psychiatrists. And that's fine. But usually they're kind of dicks. I know that people find you abrasive but you're a nice guy and you always date dickish psychiatrists. I don't get it. You hate psychiatrists and yet they're the only people you date."

Will shrugged, "I'm a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." He took a piece of divinity from the box and sighed as his teeth sank into the soft candy.

His dad smiled and said, "Yes you are. And you date dicks. They're always clever, really clever but not nice. And they're usually snobby. I think Hannibal is a little snobby, I get the feeling that if he went to a party with a bad wine he would judge the host, but he's nice. There have been a few of your boyfriends who have looked at me like something they scraped off the bottom of their shoe. They always had their doctorates and when they asked what I did and I said I was a boat mechanic they lost any interest in talking to me, acted like a guy who didn't go to college couldn't possibly be worth their time. Even that guy you dated while you were working in the docks treated me like that. You had published monographs so he thought you were just slumming it. Me? He thought I was a failure."

Will was shocked and he said, "Daddy, I didn't know that. I would have dumped them."

"I know," he nodded. "But you liked them so I didn't tell you. Hannibal is the very first guy you've dated who isn't a dick. He was asking me what it's like to work in a field continuously for fifty years and how the industry has changed in that time. And when I was telling him about the dock robots we have to lift things he acted like he was listening to the most fascinating information ever. He's a genuinely nice guy who was having a good time and I think genuinely liked my company. And if he wasn't interested in me, he faked it so well that I believed it. He's a psychiatrists but he's age appropriate and nice."

"Well, just like you came here liking him from reputation he met you with positive expectations… he wants me to quit the FBI and get a job at P.E.T.C.O. Not as a break or a

joke but as a career. He thinks I'd be happier. He doesn't care what his friends would think, I asked him, he likes the idea of me playing with, grooming and training dogs all day. He wasn't faking interest, Daddy, he cares about who people are not how they make their money. He likes the college kids who work at the opera house much more than he likes most of his very well educated colleges. He knows their personal lives, what classes their taking, how their parents are." He drained his coffee cup and stood. He started to deal with the dishes. He moved the big cooking pots into the sink to soak and put all the plates, glasses and utensils into the dishwasher.

"It's an amazing skill to take interest in someone's life that is so different than your own, to be able to empathize with and connect with someone with whom you have nothing in common."

"But he has something in common with you: me. And the kids at the opera house love opera. And the people in the supermarket are considering buying the same fruit. And a homeless man is on the same street as him, in the same weather. Hannibal sees all that and knows we're all basically the same."

"That's amazing. Y'know, most people just stay in their bubble. Rich and poor. Rich people have rich friends and don't understand why I can't fix their yacht instantly if the offer me a million dollars. And Cajuns down at the dock don't trust the other dockworkers who don't speak creole. And guys who wear three piece suits and drive Bentleys generally don't sit around eating southern pasta salad and talking about dock work."

Will thought about his dad and his discretion and the secrets and confidences they had had together over the years. "He doesn't really like to talk about his past but he was born royalty, in a castle, with servants and art and horses. He's a count. And when his parents and sister died the government seized everything and turned his castle into a horrible orphanage where he spent the remainder of his childhood. He knew joy and misery, opulence and abject poverty before he was a teenager. Then he went to Paris and lived with his uncle and I get the feeling that his uncle was broke and a bohemian artist so he saw what it's like to live lavishly on no money at all. His uncle died and that lifestyle was taken away too. And I can tell from the way that he talks about her that he loved his aunt but something happened and they don't talk. He went to the best medical school in Paris and he supported himself by working nights in the morgue and he bought his textbooks, memorized them and returned them because he couldn't afford to keep them. And when he was an adult, he sued the government and he got back everything of his parents', the money, jewels and art. And he came to Johns Hopkins and has never known want or the need to make do ever again. He doesn't define himself as a count but as a doctor because he worked hard for the latter." He finished the dishes and he covered the salads and chili and put everything into the fridge as he spoke.
"I think he looks at people now, not as their finances or lifestyle, but instead as how they compare to the family he lost. If you're nice then you're nice even if you've got a GED, or you're a simpleminded guy who collects the carts at the supermarket or are living on the streets. If you're a nice person then you're worth knowing. If you're unpleasant it doesn't matter how much money or how many degrees you have: you're beneath his consideration. Some of the most prominent people in Baltimore society, good people to network with, have never been to one of his parties because he saw them shout at a waiter. He holds them in utter contempt. He cuts them dead at the opera. We went Saturday night and he ignored several

people who tried to talk to him, women in evening gowns and men in tuxes. When we were alone in his box I asked him about it and he told me the reasons he doesn't like them. They were sort of petty reasons but if you are the least bit dislikable or rude, you're dead to him. And I know for a fact that his cleaning lady who speaks Portuguese, who he communicates with through gestures, gets a tasting menu and his personal attention in his kitchen. He knows food words in Portuguese. He drives her kids to soccer practice and drives her home when her car is in the shop." He finished with everything and began wiping down the counters. "You raised me, sure you work manual labor but I'm a minor and you control all our collective money so, theoretically, you could spend it and live very well. You don't have a college degree and get machine oil under your nails but you call me three times a week and bring local gifts for my friends. How you get by isn't important to him, how you live the life you have is. He wasn't faking interest, Daddy, he was interested. You love boats and they're what you do so that's what he was going to talk about. You're smart, Daddy, you're really smart but even if you weren't he still would have wanted to get to know you." He finished and turned, leaning against the counter to look at his father.

"He's perfect," repeated his dad.

"Completely perfect," agreed Will. He looked at the clock and said, "You must be exhausted. It's one in the morning."

"It's only midnight for me but flying always tires me out." He finished his coffee and held out the empty cup to Will who put it into the machine and started it running. "You did an amazing job tonight."

"Thanks, Daddy." The man stood and hugged him and Will didn't need to relax into it.

End Notes

I considered calling this Inte Ens Din Mamma Gillar Dig just because it was funny. But that really didn't fit.

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